

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSIC

by

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Of all the arts in Africa music is perhaps the most widely spread, the most narrowly subdued, and the most highly misinterpreted.

The very word "music" has often a strangely forbidding and even frivolous connotation. When the attribute "African" is added to it, aversion may be complete, as the picture they jointly evoke may on first impact leave the impression of a meaningless or sinister "abstract", unless we care to reverse the painting in its frame and see what is indelibly written on its back by the artists.

The development of such an apparently amorphous art may appear to be of secondary importance on a continent preoccupied with the new responsibilities of independence and of obtaining willing aid from the outside world on its own credentials; but African music, with all its implications of creative imagination, frankness and effectiveness, *is* one of those credentials.

The art of musical composition and the craft of music-making are by no means equally shared by all indigenous peoples on this continent. Some are unusually gifted, others have little interest in any but the most rudimentary melodies. The effect upon music-making of a changing environment is also most apparent, as this determines to a large extent the part that instruments have played in the musical practices of the tribes whose historic boundaries have been set by inter-tribal pressures. Where the home countryside provided no trees or reeds from which to make musical instruments, the people reverted to singing only. This is especially noticeable in the southern tip of Africa, where only one per cent of the country as a whole was covered by natural woods. In consequence the South African tribes of Nguni and Tswana groups construct and employ few instruments of any kind and, unlike most other Africans, were found to use no drums. Their music is almost exclusively vocal, with simple accompaniments such as handclapping and stamping. The same folk music phenomenon can be observed in other steppes and grass-covered plains of the world. The pacification of Africa by the western world removed many environmental limitations, but at the same time swamped the population with inappropriate factory-made musical instruments as trade goods. H. M. Stanley, for example, as early as 1882, carried a number of musical boxes with him as gifts on his journeys up the Congo.

Before we can trace the directions in which indigenous music is travelling, it is necessary to ascertain from where it appears to have come. Africa has been at a great disadvantage because of the lack of a written literature until comparatively recent times and, in consequence, no indigenous musical notation has been devised for internal and not exotic use. Until the invention of acoustic recording, most of the evidence concerning the nature of African music was derived from foreign accounts, which were often biased and frequently hostile. Even the gentle David Livingstone found the sound of African dances and singing more than he could bear with equanimity.

African folk musics are sufficiently mature, crystallised in style and form, to warrant recognition as a culture distinctive to this continent. The internal characteristics which differentiate one tribal music from another are largely attributable to the parallel divergences in vernacular languages, to which each music is inseparably bound in poetic and semantic union: differences in musical style can be traced directly to differences in speech melody. The southerly Bantu-speaking groups, for instance, have many common musical traits which they share only to a lesser degree with the Sudanic-speaking peoples north of the equator.

The possible or probable influence of foreign cultures upon African musical compositions is a continual source of speculation, the protagonists of Egyptian and Indonesian origins, for example, vying with each other to claim non-African derivations for some of the more complex musical forms, such as the xylophone ensembles of the Chopi tribe, which they cannot bring themselves to credit to those who have propagated the music continuously for the last few centuries—without external copyright. One aspect of musical origin is constantly ignored, in that cultural influences of a permanent rather than a superficial nature are likely to be caused by genetic propinquity rather than by casual social contact. The effect of ten centuries of Arab association with the coastal tribes of East Africa is clearly demonstrated in every shade of musical taste, from wholly Arabian through what is locally called “Ta-Arab”, or partly Arabian, to wholly African-derived music, existing side by side in the eastern seaports.

The ultimate origin of the *germ* of musical ingenuity, which has resulted in the many forms of folk music of this continent, must therefore be left to the linguists and historians to decide.

In so far as Central and Southern Africa are concerned, the first authentic observations about African music appear in the journals of the mid-sixteenth century Portuguese explorers and missionaries. Writing of the inhabitants of the south-eastern seaboard, they remarked upon the bands of instruments which accompanied chiefs upon their journeys, the presence of numerous musicians in the royal households, and the continual jollifications of the populace with singing and dancing, which they compared with similar folk festivities in Europe.

The three kinds of musical instruments most frequently mentioned were the drums, the xylophones and the *mbira*, a peculiarly African instrument consisting of a number of short metal reeds, which had no European equivalent and was, consequently, in later times misnamed the “kaffir piano”.

The texts of two songs were noted by a Franciscan monk, André Fernandes, in 1562. These are not only the first lyrics from Southern Africa ever committed to paper, but the earliest written phrases in any Bantu language to have survived. They were sung by men of a Moçambique tribe which eventually took the name of Chopi, and in one of the songs they mentioned the unfamiliar eating habits of the Portuguese. (Nearly four hundred years later I recorded another Chopi song with the same theme.)

Little notice was taken of indigenous African music in the 17th and 18th centuries, except as a normal accompaniment to work on the part of the coastal tribes and of the slaves, mostly those carried to the cotton plantations of the Southern States of America. Work chants were commonplace everywhere in this period, both on land and at sea, and few were considered remarkable. So it was not until the middle of the 19th century, with the emancipation of the slaves after the American War between the States, coupled with the evangelical drive into Africa itself in the wake of the early Protestant missionaries such as Moffat and Livingstone, that Negro spirituals on the one hand and the teaching of well-known hymns to pagan Africans on the other, came into general prominence. This gave a religious and emotional slant to all music considered to be suitable for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic, regardless of its largely exotic origin in each case.

From then on until well into the present century indigenous musics of any kind which did not appear to be directly connected with spiritual and social uplift, or which in any way could be associated with a heathen past, were tabooed, if not strictly prohibited, wherever mission schools were established. Since most education for Africans was in the hands of religious denominations, widespread misconceptions about African folk compositions became fashionable, both in church and state. It gave rise to the popular assumption that African music was by nature inferior, primitive and crude. African converts, and their children after them, accepted this dictum without question and so paved the way for the next invasion of foreign music, American jazz.

Unlike the first, this intrusion was secular. Jazz was approved and supported by the contention that a certain element of African musicality was supposed to have contributed to its origin in the Southern States. This element was popularly thought to be African rhythms but, in fact, was a partial reversion to Negro modality. Rising social and colour consciousness on this continent, stimulated by films and records featuring jazz during the period between the two world wars, gave younger generations of Africans a new dance stimulus. (The film "Stormy Weather" was a case in point.) This stimulus was especially felt in the towns, where continuity of the classical forms of African music and dancing had been unwittingly broken by industrial development and the growing urban environment it inevitably created for its employees of mixed linguistic origins. A wave of popular dance music encouraged and propagated by advertising and commerce, and latterly by radio broadcasts, flooded the continent, lapping over tribal and language boundaries.

History then repeated itself. A form of social and political struggle for Africa began to overtake the evangelical and geographical scramble of the previous century, the earlier one supported by the hymns of the Wesley family and of more recent revivalists, the other by the free improvisations of the saxophone and trumpet bands of Mississippi jazz-men.

Neither invasion has proved culturally adequate, and in spite of all the forces of novelty, social change and "popularity", the underlying rules of musical integrity—by African as well as by world standards—have not been met. Where the new musics had pretensions of being selective, they have succeeded only in becoming a medley. A false set of values had overtaken musical thinking from the highest educational circles downwards, and the easy virtues of imitation had replaced the hard disciplines of constructive artistry. Today, fashionable and locally popular musicians of the African towns in each of the many territories are often confused and dismayed at the occasional international recognition afforded their "backward" country cousins who, innocently enough, have kept to the principles and continued to compose according to the rules of vernacular poetry and craft, while their own pretentious compositions receive scant praise. The situation is basic to the success or failure of all compositions which purport to be representative of a nation or culture. The integrity and discipline of an artistic medium must not be sacrificed to novelty. Freedom in music has often been confused with licence. As Igor Stravinsky stated in his "Poetics of Music": "The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free. In art as in everything else, one can build only upon a resisting foundation: whatever constantly gives way to pressure, constantly renders movement impossible. Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength."

One needs to enumerate some of the factors which make for strength in the craft of African music. They fall within three main divisions; the conscious craft which is stimulated and limited both by physical and social environment; the inherited preferences of past generations; and the depth of philosophy which stimulates a poet-composer to express himself in terms appreciated as adequate and meaningful by his fellow countrymen. It is generally accepted that the greater part of all folk music stems directly from the rise and fall, stress and flow, of language. Instrumental music, with few exceptions, such as the herdsmen's flute tunes, came as a secondary enrichment. Unlike European tongues, African languages are described as "tone" languages, because the use of the correct pitch in each succeeding syllable largely determines the meaning of the word or phrase. Incorrect tone sequences make nonsense of the words. It stands to reason that the setting of vernacular words to foreign melodies, regardless of the demands of semantic tone, makes any lyric meaningless unless an artificial convention is simultaneously created to relate the absurdity of mispronunciation in song to the correct use of the word tones in speech. This is a situation which no genuine poet would tolerate

in any society. Only in recent years has any attempt been made by African hymn- and song-writers to correct this aberration.

It is the melody of the spoken language and not the fixed pattern of a tune which must be paramount in the lyrics of any African language. The use of the well-known musical form called "passacaglia"¹ is ideal for this purpose and is already the basis of much of the best African music of the present day. Failure to grasp this rule has made the emancipation of African music unlikely within the present generation, particularly in institutions which have created false precedents. Consequently, the development of music in educated, as opposed to preliterate, African circles has tended to reflect the exotic social convention of the teachers, ignoring the standards of local poetic and musical integrity.

Here, indeed, is a classical example of Stravinsky's non-resisting foundation which renders artistic progress impossible. Either the rules must be observed or the language itself discarded as a musical medium. It is a problem that can only be resolved by the innate sensibilities and decisions of African composers and poets. Instrumental music which is unaccompanied by song falls into a rather different category and is conditioned by the presence or absence of the craft of instrument making.

When all the objective difficulties have been met, we have still to account for the subjective forces which also mould the nature of a national art, style and taste. It takes generations of creative artists to set a style which may be distinguished as characteristic of a people. Taste in music, as in other arts, is not the free choice of individuals but is conditioned by their inherited preferences, however much they may be modified or entrenched within a lifetime. Certain art symbols are found to be satisfactory in conveying meaning within a given section of society. The symbols in themselves may be meaningless, but conventional usage has given them a meaning which enables the artist to convey some recognizable truth to his contemporaries. The success or failure of this artistic manipulation is the measure of the greatness of the artist as a craftsman, though the symbols themselves are neutral. As Picasso exclaimed about painting, "Art is a lie", but swiftly added "a lie that makes us realize truth . . . The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies." (A. J. Barr, "Picasso, Fifty Years of his Art.")

The symbols of musical artistry are less easy to define and far more than the sum of the individual notes and phrases employed. A personal or national style of music can be recognized by sensitive persons who are attuned to it and who share the common ground of conventional symbols with the performers. The phenomenon of being "in tune" or "out of tune" is one.

The manner of dividing the octave into convenient and accepted intervals is by no means universally consistent. The western tempered, or 12 regular interval scale, may be recognized in theory but is far from being practised in African communities, several of whose inherent modes have now been measured. In the past 30 years I have found, from a sample of over 100 African tribes, that 40 per cent employed seven interval scales, 20 per cent six interval and the remaining 40 per cent five interval scales. "The African" does not exist as a single entity in a musical sense, but rather as a large number of distinctive cultural units, each with its own modal preferences to which it has every right. The commonly held illusion that the western tempered scale possesses some divinely appointed right over all others cannot be substantiated. It may be convenient for western purposes but is not practical in Africa at the present time. Musical evolution may gradually tend towards a common scale or scales on the part of trained and experienced musicians, but there is little sign of this being realised in Africa so far.

¹"Passacaglia" (or Chaconne)—a term originally associated with a seventeenth century dance performed to a repetitive short theme or ground to which many variations were added, a form used extensively by the keyboard composers of the period.

On the contrary, much of the attraction and authenticity of African music lies in the distinctive tone quality of their voices.

The use of European-designed instruments may hasten a compromise under urban conditions where foreign instruments only are available, but a few minutes of listening to any African radio station will provide ample confirmation that the attempt to adopt the foreign choice of intervals "is a custom more honour'd in the breach than the observance".

The unfortunate legacy of constant imitation, outside the present boundaries of subjective possibility, has seriously undermined African musical foundations and this problem will have to be faced before real progress can be expected. It springs from incorrect teaching by foreign musicians, coupled with an earnest desire on the part of very many Africans to become accomplished in the arts of the stronger culture. The foreign teacher is usually, and understandably, ignorant of the logic of African musics and is generally incapable of acquiring them; the African student is usually unaware that his native culture has logic at all and therefore concentrates on the standard textbooks supplied by the foreign teacher. The change of musical outlook which this produces is sometimes mistaken for progress. It may be socially acceptable but is often musically decadent.

It is significant that many of the new political leaders in Africa today have expressed (both in private to me and in public) their conviction that the arts of their countries have been distorted and overlooked, and that there must be a return to the integrities of indigenous skill if their composers, musicians and artists are to do justice to what they consider to be their distinctive national personalities. Everything I have discovered in studying the structure of African musics lends both weight to their awakened consciousness and depth to the principles underlying their belief.

Apart from the frame within which any national art must move, the question still remains: "What have they to say within this context?" Examination of the texts of many hundreds of African songs underlines the universal quality found in all genuine folk musics; namely, that people sing about themselves and in doing so create not only entertainment but social adjustment. The good are praised, the evil lampooned, individual sorrows are shared and a sense of community enhanced; in other words, folk music, properly and naturally employed, is therapeutic. This is by no means always the case with popular musics which are commercially propagated for their sales value. Throughout the whole of Africa the exploitation of musical pornography is rife and appears to have the approval of the authorities—who may either be unaware of the implication behind the words, or accept it as a form of emancipation. It is perhaps fortunate for the reputation of the continent that its town songs have often been enjoyed as music but have not been translated into a world language. Whereas African country songs still reflect the character of the people in all their moods, through contemplation, spiritual devotion, social rectitude and family solidarity, town songs are preoccupied with the cruder biological urges, apparently unrestrained by public opinion. Strangely enough, political songs and songs of protest usually adopt the form and style of foreign hymns and fail to suggest a national consciousness which one would normally associate with a patriotic song. (A change in this respect may yet come. The national anthem recently chosen for Kenya was based upon a local children's folk tune.)

If there is to be any significant development of original music in Africa it must undoubtedly follow the same path as classical musics elsewhere, by consolidating the foundations of natural talent—of which there is now ample evidence. The acid test and justification of political emancipation has always been the voluntary acceptance of the social, intellectual, spiritual and moral disciplines portrayed in the national arts. This way lies international recognition.